CAPTAIN GRAVITY AND THE POWER OF VRIL

Experience Gravity's Attraction

It's been more than a half-decade ago that the world last met the quasi-Golden-Age hero known as Captain Gravity. But apparently Gravity's pull extends through time as well as space...

Later this year, Penny Farthing Press will bring back the intrepid hero in an original limited series, ***Captain Gravity and the Power of Vril.*** The story by *Josh Dysart, Sal Velluto, & Bob Almond* takes readers back to the Golden Age for a tale filled with fantastic adventures, unbelievable twists, and that Golden Age mainstay, reprehensible Nazis.

So who is Captain Gravity and where did he come from? Creator *Stephen Vrattos* offers a quick history lesson. "Captain Gravity is simply my response to creating a Golden Age superhero," Vrattos said. "In 1998, Penny-Farthing Press Assistant Publisher *Jim Owens* extended me the offer to pitch an idea for a four-issue limited series. There was one catch: the idea had to be set in the Golden Age. Having sold only a handful of stories—only one of which had been published to that point—I was under no delusions that Penny Farthing would consider me for their project. Plus, the offer was going out to several other comic book writers—known comic book writers (Jim never revealed who)—so I viewed this as simply a friendly gesture on behalf of Jim.

"I figured 'What the hell?' and threw everything I loved into the mix: Nazis (you *gotta* have Nazis in a Golden Age story), old Hollywood (What could be more American or romantic?), ancient ruins (I'd always wanted to do a story involving the ruins at Chichen Itza since I visited them in 1990—and ancient civilizations and artifacts also connected nicely with the movie serials of the time a la ***Indiana Jones***) and aliens (my recollections of the wall carvings and Mayan designs conjured up images of those ***Chariots of the Gods*** books of the 1970s, which always fascinated me. The main argument of those books argued that the ancient civilizations had help in building their structures from alien races, so...).

"Still, I needed a hook—something that would make my Golden Age hero unique. From what I knew of the heroes of that time, they did not suffer the foibles of the Silver Age ones—the heroes that I grew up with and loved—but they *did* have a weakness, just not one of a personal nature. There also weren't any black heroes, given the country's racial perceptions of the time. What could create more tension and interesting story possibilities than to make my hero black? Superman had Kryptonite, Green Lantern had the color yellow, Captain Gravity would have the color of his skin. Captain Gravity could harness the most powerful force in the universe, but that power was useless against racism."

"Storywise, though set in the Golden Age, I wanted to write the series in a more contemporary vein. As great as those stories may have been for the time, I don't think the same stories would hold up to today's comic book fans."

The new series reintroduces readers to Joshua Jones as he embarks on another far-reaching adventure. "Joshua Jones is a black super hero wrestling with a global Nazi occult plot," ***Power of the Vril*** writer Dysart explained. "Hitler and his gang are trying to acquire the secret of a mysterious substance known, since ancient times, as Vril Energy. Simultaneously, Joshua is trying to overcome unrequited love as well as deal with his aversion to violence in a world that's marching towards WWII. All this is told with brush strokes of quasi-innocence and humanist pulp sensibility, of course. Magic, super Nazis, the history of the symbol known in Sanskrit as the Swastika, and a few surprises that I don't dare give away, are elements in Joshua's journey to save the girl and the world. His great duel with the High Reich Sorcerer will lead from Los Angeles to Egypt to fascist-occupied Libya to Poland to Berlin and finally to the Java Sea in 1939."

It's been almost two-thirds of a century since WWII—so what is it about this era that makes it so perpetually appealing to both readers and creators? "I don't know," Vrattos said. "I'm a fan, too. I *love* WWII-inspired movies like ***The Great Escape, Kelly's Heroes*** and ***Where Eagles Dare***, and TV shows like ***Rat Patrol, Hogan's Heroes,*** and ***Band of Brothers***. And the real-life dramas that came out of WWII almost seem scripted in the way they played out. D-Day, The Battle of the Bulge, Midway... so many other incredible battles and turning points are the stuff of legend, only true, making them more incredible than any fictional epic. And the characters—Hitler, Churchill, Stalin, Patton, Montgomery, Eisenhower—put those of Dickens to shame. Plus, the line between good and evil, black and white is so *definitive*—there isn't much gray area to muddy one's thoughts or feelings. After all, how many Nazi sympathizers do you know?"

Don't think this is just a formulaic WWII adventure, though. "First and foremost, this is a character driven book," Dysart explained. "While there is plenty of action—especially once things get rolling—what's truly interesting to me are the character dynamics. Our hero, our Nazi fighter, is no great patriot—he's a human being caught in an extraordinary situation because he loves his friends deeply and struggles to do the right thing.

"Also our sense of history sets us apart from other work in this genre. *Sal [Velluto]* and I are far too tuned to reality to let the narrative run roughshod over it. So expect a lot of interesting and accurate details about the world as it was, leading up to the war. And it's a holistic exploration of that history as well, since a second bookend narrative talks about the influence of that global war on the geo-politics of the early sixties and essentially on the world today. It's a 40's serial, a tribute to the golden age of heroes, a modern exploration of what it means to save someone while letting others die, and a two-fisted tale for smart people, all rolled into one big gumbo... maybe it's that ambition makes it different!"

How did Dysart—currently a hot commodity thanks in part to his recent debut on Vertigo's ***Swamp Thing***—come to write ***Captain Gravity***? "It was *Courtney Huddleston*, creator of ***Decoy*** and the talent coordinator at Penny Farthing, who brought me on. He was a fan of ***Violent Messiahs*** and asked me to do a ***Decoy*** story, to which I said yes. But my schedule was a little tight, and *Captain Gravity* worked better with my availability."

Dysart appreciates the opportunity to flex different creative muscles. "This project is so different from ***Swamp Thing***, and not just in subject matter, but also in execution. *Swamp Thing* is minimal; each issue is a little curvy pulp poem to all things horrible, heart breaking, wondrous or just plain weird; an attempt at post-traditional EC horror comics. ***Captain Gravity*** is dense, heavy with storytelling that hopes to invoke a more classic unraveling of narrative. It's cool to have both things hit at the same time!"

Dysart isn't the only established talent drawn to ***Captain Gravity***. Penny Farthing has also brought in veteran artists *Sal Velluto & Bob Almond* to handle the illustrative duties for the series. Velluto explained how he came on board. "For a few years I have had a friendly business relationship with the folks at Penny Farthing Press. We had discussed the possibility of working together, as soon as the ideal project came around. When an opening was created for me to draw *Captain Gravity*, I was glad to accept and enthusiastic to give it my best.

"I understand this particular character is near and dear to *Ken White*, as ***Captain Gravity*** was the first comic book title published by the company, when it started, in 1988. Besides the passion for the world of Golden Age comics which I share with Ken, I don't take for granted the chance of working on Penny Farthing's premiere character."

Velluto turned to the Golden Age for artistic inspiration. "I admit that I have a few books on *Alfonse Maria Mucha* in my library, and probably made an unconscious, indirect reference to his 'Figures Décoratives' when I designed the covers of the ***Captain Gravity*** miniseries," Velluto said.

"It's no secret, also, that I am a great admirer of the legendary sequential artists of the past. The work of *Alex Raymond* on ***Flash Gordon***, *Hal Foster* on ***Prince Valiant*** and—along with *Burne Hogarth*—on ***Tarzan***, to name a few, have been a great influence on me, since I was a little kid.

"As far as research material, besides various internet references (thank you, *Joshua Dysart*, for the extensive list of links!) I have also used my books on *Norman Rockwell's* ***Saturday Evening Post*** covers as well as a fourteen volume set reproducing Italian magazine covers of the World War II era.

"I hope, after all this name dropping, the readers of ***Captain Gravity and the Power of the Vril*** will see and feel the great appreciation I have for all these great and influential artists."

"Sal & I are not trying to specifically capture the look of the era," Almond added, "but we *are* familiar with and indeed influenced by many of the artists and styles of the era. But ***Captain Gravity*** will be more in line with a modern artistic take on a retro concept, a la *Dave Stevens'* ***Rocketeer***. You'll also will find some retro bonuses in the published package that help to capture the look of the era.

"Artists generally enjoy diversity and I love well-done period pieces. Joshua has done a wonderful job utilizing the exotic locales, adding historical people & references, bringing in international espionage, the supernatural, evil Nazis, and a whole lotta pulp-style action into his story, and Sal & I are having a ball mixing it all up and bringing it to life."

"In the past, a few people have described my style as 'old fashioned' and considered it as a liability," Velluto said. "I hope I can demonstrate with this project—as I did with others—that my style can be a definite asset. ***Captain Gravity*** offers me all the right premises to do a good job: the period setting, the precise historical references, a strong story, solid characters, the collaboration of a great creative team, and the backing of a company that is committed to making good comic books. These are elements which would make this project appealing to any good artist."

I MUST KEEP MY OWN BREATHING BY MIND (GRAVITATIONAL PULL TO KEEP SOUND WAVES FROM DRIFTING OFF.
ONE OF THE MORE INTERESTING THINGS I'VE LEARNED RECENTLY.
I WANTED TO HELP, I WAS EAGER TO HELP, BUT—
MISS PARKS, WE UNDERSTAND BUT YOU'VE GOT TO HEAR US OUT.
NO, YOU WON'T UNDERSTAND.
I'M DONE SPYING ON JAN GUNTHER FOR YOU.
IT'S BEEN OVER A MONTH NOW AND I HAVEN'T REHAB ANYTHING. I'M STARTING TO HAVE GENUINE FEELINGS FOR THIS MAN, AND ONE OF THOSE FEELINGS IS GUILT.
IT'S THIS TRIP TO AFRICA WE'RE CONCERNED WITH, MISS PARKS.
SO WHO ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO BE? I'VE NEVER MET WITH YOU.
FLEMING, MI'AM. IAN FLEMING, BRITISH INTELLIGENCE.
THE GERMANS ARE ENSLAVING THE WORLD. THEY'RE COMMITTING RESOURCES TO LARGE SCALE EXCAVATIONS IN INDIA, CHINA, LATIN AMERICA, AND THE GREAT DESERT... JUST TO NAME A FEW.
YOUR BOYFRIEND'S FAMILY IS TIED TO THE GERMAN GOVERNMENT. HE'S ALSO THE WORLD'S FOREMOST EXPERT ON THE SYMBOL IN QUESTION.
NOW HE'S GOING TO NORTHERN AFRICA FOR A DIG. MORE OF THIS SOUNDS THE LEAST BIT PECULIAR TO YOU?
ALL THE DIGS ARE CENTERED ON THE OLDEST REMNANTS OF THE ANCIENT SYMBOL KNOWN IN SANSKRIT AS THE SWASTIKA.
I DON'T— I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK.

One task that Velluto undertook with great relish was a character redesign. Was it tough to design a costume that's both eye-catching and evocative of an earlier time period? "Yes and no," Velluto said. "In the past I have had situations where a lot of re-drawing was necessary, before myself, and the publisher, were satisfied of the results. In the case of Captain Gravity ,the task was easier than usual, since there was a good visual foundation set by the artists who preceded me. I built on that foundation, when I redesigned the costume and the editorial staff was on the same page and went with my first set of sketches.

Captain Gravity is the latest in a series of collaborations between Velluto and inker *Bob Almond*. "Sal & I have been working together as a team since 1997 on the latter half of Acclaim's ***Bloodshot*** run. In that time we have done work on ***JLA, Aquaman,*** and ***JSA*** for DC and a critically-acclaimed three-year run on ***Black Panther*** for Marvel.

"My relationship with Penny-Farthing began in '96, inking *Courtney Huddleston* on the first ***Decoy*** series. I had been asked by Courtney in the middle of my *Black Panther* gig to ink another artist on a new project—incidentally, that project was the first ***Captain Gravity*** series, as I later found out—but I unfortunately had to decline the offer.

"About a year after ***Panther*** I was actually hired by Courtney to ink that project again since there had been production delays and the inker that they'd hired had moved on. After a few weeks the original pencil artist was changed, so I promptly suggested my pal Sal as a consideration—and we subsequently became the art team of the series."

While ***Captain Gravity's*** look is somewhat reminiscent of *Dave Stevens'* pulp-inspired hero ***The Rocketeer***, any story similarities are entirely coincidental. "***The Rocketeer*** never entered my mind when I conceived of Captain Gravity," Vrattos said. "I had seen the film, but hadn't read the comics. In fact, I left the design of the costume to *Keith Martin*, the artist of the first ***Captain Gravity*** series, and the Penny Farthing staff. I never mentioned any costume ideas. My biggest concern was that the look of the characters match their personalities. As I saw it, Joshua should be an innocent sixteen-year-old; for Avery, I suggested *Tex Avery*; Shane was to be an amalgam of *Errol Flynn* and *Peter O'Toole* (from ***My Favorite Year***); Chase was a Mary-Ann-from-***Gilligan's-Island*** type and so on."

"The way I see it," Dysart added, "both ***The Rocketeer*** and ***Captain Gravity*** draw from the same source material. Once settled into the read, I think the audience will find the two properties are very different in theme, tone and voice."

Readers will get a chance to find out for themselves in early December, when ***Captain Gravity & the Power of the Vril #1***, a $2.95 comic, is scheduled for release.

BY CLIFF BIGGERS

I HATE LEAVING YOU, BUT THIS IS MY WORK AND IT'S ONLY FOR A SHORT TIME. I PROMISE. SAY YOU UNDERSTAND.
I UNDERSTAND.
IS THERE SOMETHING YOU WANTED TO SAY, DARLING?
NO...IT'S NOT IMPORTANT.
I REALLY SHOULD GO HOME AND GET SOME SLEEP, BUT I HAVEN'T BEEN SLEEPING WELL LATELY.
HOLLYWOOD
SO I ZOOM TO THE SANTINI MANSION AND PEEK IN ON CHASE.
BRRRRRR
GOOD NIGHT.
GOOD MORNING... AND THANK YOU!
IT'S NOT THAT I'M SPYING AND YOU JUST... CHECKING IN.
AND NOW I'M NOT FOLLOWING HER, I'M JUST MAKING SURE SHE GETS HOME ALL RIGHT.
FINALLY I DECIDE TO LEAVE THE POOR GIRL ALONE WHEN I NOTICE SHE'S BEING TAILED.

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